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# MEMORY CULTURE IN THE MAKING: THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM IN THE MEMORY OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH (1862-1937)

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the Heidelberg Catechism in the memory of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) between 1862 and 1937, with specific focus on the events of 1862. By making the Heidelberg Catechism the point of focus the article's contribution is not by way of answering the "what happened"-questions related to the period, but rather in terms of an analysis of *how* "what happened" had been remembered over a period of seventy five years by the DRC. In order to do so, the first two sections of the article deals with the theory of memory, the development of memory culture in communities, and the significance of such an analysis for historical thinking. The third part provides four sets of examples of Heidelberg Catechism recollections as a contribution to analyses of the memory culture of the DRC in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One would probably not have to search far or deep to find the Heidelberg Catechism in the living memory of the Dutch Reformed Church – in the collective memory of this religious community, as well as in the minds and hearts of a vast number of its congregants. It has been said to have

had more direct impact on the rank and file of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) than any of the other confessional statements (Gerstner 1991:16).

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It served as a religious instructional manual for congregants in all phases of life: young children received their earliest faith-teaching at its hand, youths used it in preparation for public confession of faith<sup>1</sup>, and for some time adults could listen to preaching on the Catechism every Sunday afternoon (Gerstner 1991:17).<sup>2</sup>

In the early days of South Africa's Reformed history, the Heidelberg Catechism was imbedded in daily life. The first religious leaders to arrive in South Africa after 1652, known as "sieketroosters" (comforters of the sick), had to sign the Heidelberg Catechism, as did the first ministers of the DRC. Moreover, even the early schoolteachers were under the obligation to sign a form of subscription to the Catechism, and it is said that it was used as a text to teach children to read. The Catechism, together with the Belgic Confession, were also printed in the back of the large States Bible – those bibles generally used as family bibles (Gerstner 1991:30).

Given the endearing place the Heidelberg Catechism had in the DRC, it is perhaps no surprise that a critical remark about it by one of the ministers of the church came to be regarded as such a watershed moment in the history of the church. 1862 is remembered as the year of that synodical meeting during which a minister of the DRC, J.J. Kotzé, was discharged from office – a first in the history of this church. If the sentiment of the moderator of that meeting, Andrew Murray (jr), is anything to go by, it was a grave moment:

Als er ooit een ogenblik was dat ik wensen kon dat een ander mijn plaats bekleedde, dan is het nu. Wij moeten tot een aller-plechtigste plicht overgaan – een werk dat indien ik mij niets vergis, nog nimmer in de Kerk van Zuid-Afrika verricht is. Na lang en biddend beraad is de Synode tot het besluit gekomen, dat zij één der broeders schuldig bevonden heft aan een dwaling in de leer ... Hij is schuldig bevonden, en is door de Synode geoordeeld onwaardig te zijn om zijn ambt te bekleden. Biddend en ootmoedig moeten wij in dit oogenblik opzien tot de Heer der gemeente. Die meent te staan zie toe dat hij niet valle (Du Plessis 1920:228).

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- 1 Gerstner writes that "[m]emorisation of the Catechism (or at least the Compendium) was required for becoming a communicant member of the church, until they were largely replaced by Hellenbroek's even more Reformed catechetical works in the late eighteenth century" (Gerstner 1991:32).
  - 2 This was the practice in the DRC until 1842. Thereafter the church order stated that ministers had to preach on the Catechism at least twelve times a year, and individual congregations had to report to the local presbytery whether this was adhered to (Du Toit 1963: preface). Gerstner, however, states that these services were not overly popular (Gerstner 1991:32).

Despite the remorse expressed by Murray that something like this had happened, for many and for very long, this decision of the synod was seen as an act of God – a sign of his grace, a true gift of wisdom from above. In J.D. Kestell's account of Prof N.J. Hofmeyr's defense of the church's decision in the face of the legal battle that commenced after J.J. Kotzé's suspension, he writes:

Wat hij schreef, werd op hoogen prijs gesteld. Het gaf licht aan velen, die niet wisten, wat wij van de zaak moesten denken. Ds. G.W.A. van de Lingen roemde de stukken hoog. Hij zeide, dat de man, die zoo schreef, door God bestemd was, om in dezen strijd voorop te gaan (Kestell 1911:101).

What led to this momentous incident? In the 27th session of this synod, it was decided that the various points on the agenda having to do with “upholding the pure doctrine” (“*die handhawing van die suiwerheid van die leer*”) were to be left in the hands of a commission who was given the task to report on it (Moorrees 1937:918). One of the points they had to report on was the practice of *preaching* on the Heidelberg Catechism once a month, as was stipulated in the church order of the time. The issue was raised by members of the church council of Cape Town who wanted to know what exactly was meant by *preaching* on the Heidelberg Catechism. The commission recommended the following:

De Synode verklare dat zij door het prediken over den Catechismus verstaan wil hebben, eene uitlegging van de vragen en antwoorden, en eene *VERDEDIGING* derzelve op grond van Gods Woord (Dreijer 1898:22).

The importance of such an explanation was further emphasised by Rev Huët who said that he had heard ministers in the Netherlands declaring that they do not agree on some of the questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism (Moorrees 1937:918). To this Rev J.J. Kotzé, the man soon to be expelled, replied that:

de woorden in het antwoord op de 60<sup>ste</sup> vraag<sup>3</sup> ‘*en nog steeds tot alle boosheid geneigd*’ taal behelzen, die niet eens in den mond van

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- 3 Question and answer 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism reads as follow: Question: How are you righteous before God? Answer: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ. He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had

een heiden waarheid zou bevatten of hij moest een duivel zijn, veel minder nog in dien van den christen (Dreijer, 1898:22).

This comment of J.J. Kotzé led to his expulsion, and this seems to have been regarded as a proper reaction, according to Dreyer's (1924:115) comment that "[h]et laat zich begrijpen, dat dit woord grote ontsteltenis verwekte." The synod gave Kotzé the option (and this was also his only option) to retract his comment, and also provided him with various opportunities to do so. However, he was not willing to withdraw his statement.

The article explores the Heidelberg Catechism in the memory of the Dutch Reformed Church between 1862 and 1937, with specific focus on the events of 1862. Although the status of confessional documents, like the Heidelberg, in the Reformed tradition is not often questioned, their role in the histories of confessional communities are indeed to be subjected to scrutiny. Confessional documents are not only to be understood and discussed theologically, but also historically. Therefore it is important to ask how confessional documents have functioned, how they were used, and how their meanings for specific communities have changed through these processes – indeed how memory and identity are intertwined. The aim is not glorification of the Heidelberg Catechism, but bringing the historical contexts in which it has functioned into sharper focus, and linking these events to the DRC's understanding of itself as a confessing community. Studying the memory of the Heidelberg Catechism in this period (instead of, for example, the "struggle against liberalism" or the sovereignty of church law in relation to civil law<sup>4</sup>) the article's contribution is not by way of answering the "what happened"-questions related to the period, but rather in terms of an analysis of *how* "what happened" had been remembered over a period of seventy five years by the DRC. In order to do so, the first two sections of the article deals with the theory of memory, the development of memory cultures in communities, and the significance of such an analysis for historical thinking. The third part provides four sets of examples of Heidelberg Catechism recollections as a contribution to analyses of the memory culture of the DRC in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.

- 4 Both of these are well-known issues of the period according to DRC historiography. Cff. Moorrees, A. 1937. *Die Nederduite Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika 1652-1873*; Van der Watt, P.B. 1977-1986. *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (various volumes); Hanekom, T.N. 1951. *Die liberale rigting in Suid-Afrika. 'n Kerkhistoriese studie.*

## 2. MEMORY: THE PAST THAT HAPPENED AND HAPPENS TO US

The event at the synod of 1862, and especially the dismissal of J.J. Kotzé and the aftermath of that decision, have indeed been thoroughly documented. But merely answering the question “what happened” in the past is not the only question to be asked in order to come to grips with the past or gain understanding of its impact. In the words of Bernard Lategan

the goal of history is not to understand bygone days, but to understand what remains of those times and what is still present today (Lategan 2007: 169).

This article suggests that using memory as a heuristic tool in historical research equips us with other means of historical analysis, and helps us to formulate and answer different types of questions about our past(s). The study of memory provides us with research devices to analyse and describe not only specific events, figures or documents of the past, but also, for example, the significance they came to bear for specific people, and, accordingly, the influence they had on events, mind-sets, decisions and sense-making processes that followed.

What is meant by memory, and how does it assist us in historical research?

In the first place, memory gives us a nuanced understanding of what we mean by “the past” by emphasising the abstruseness of the concept. From memory’s point of view, the past is an enigma: the memories we have of the past are from moments in time that have definitely passed, but at the same time those moments remain unavoidably present through our memories of them. In David Leichter’s words, it means that “the past is not ‘over and done with,’ but rather it continues to exist and press into the present” (Leichter 2012:124). This enigma flows from the very nature of memory. On the one hand memory is understood as *things* remembered (more clearly indicated by the plural, memories) – remains from days of yore, times that can never be repeated. On the other hand we also understand memory as a human faculty. This means that memory also implies the act of recollecting. The concept of memory thus at once includes the *thing* remembered, as well as the *ability* to remember and indeed the *act* or *process* of recollection.<sup>5</sup> From this we can conclude that memory serves

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5 This distinction comes from the earliest reflection on memory in Greek thought. The English word “memory” refers to both the Greek words *anamnesis* and *mneme*. Philip Gardner explains this dual nature of memory as follow: “*Mneme* is the cognitive aspect of memory by which moments from the past are retained, facilitating ‘the persistence within the mind of impressions formed at an earlier

as a bridge between different times: through memory, moments of the past present itself to us in the present moment.

David Pellauer takes this assertion one step further, arguing that it is because of memory that we have a past, and, in fact, the very experience of being in time: “[w]ithout memory we would have no idea or experience of the past as past, hence no idea of time as lived” (Pellauer 2007:110). From this point of view we can perhaps argue that remembering is an attempt to “incorporate a living past into the present” (Provan 2003:240) and that studying memory is the way of understanding how that incorporation takes place. History as a discipline therefore always deals with the temporality of human life, and this means that it is related both to the reality of the past and the activities of the human mind in the present. Rösen continues:

History is the course of time in the real world and, at the same time, a meaningful interpretation of this course ... Thus history is always more than only the past. It is a relationship between past and present, that has a realistic nature as a temporal chain of conditions and at the same time an ‘idealistic’ or symbolic nature as an interpretation that bears meaning for the purposes of cultural orientation and charges it with norms and values, hopes and fears. (Rösen 2006:2-3).

In Rösen’s phrase “interpretation that bears meaning” we find the idea of active construction so as to argue that the continuities and discontinuities in time (and what these indicate) are not a given but in fact a sense-making process. Or as Mieke Bal writes, how past, present and future are linked to each other are not “psychic historical accidents” but the “product of collective agency” (Bal, Crewe & Spitzer 1999:vii). This “product of collective agency”, one can argue, has to do with self-understanding and the formation of identities. Memory then, as Cubitt (2007:120) states, is not merely about

people having a certain memory for information, but on their having the kind of sense of continuous identity (whether focused on an individualistic concept of self or on a broader notion of social participation) that memory is vital in supporting.

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moment’. Memory understood in this way connects us directly with our past and carries us forward, as it were, to the living moment within which our memories present themselves. *Anamnesis* is the pragmatic or practical aspect of memory, whereby we actively search in the present moment for a memory that we wish to recall or which we fear we may have lost” (Gardner 2010:99).

To endure in time, that is, to be in possession of a sense of identity that can stand the flow of time, is a challenge faced by individuals, groups, communities and institutions alike.

Consequently, memory is always a complex process, as Olick states, “a fluid negotiation of the desires of the present and the legacies of the past” (Olick 2010:159). This negotiation flows from the distance “between experiencing an event and remembering it” (Misztal 2003:6) and the bridging of this gap “by our creative interpretation of the past” (Misztal 2003:6) is what constitutes recollection.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as Misztal, drawing on Huyssen, argues, “the past is not simply given in memory, ‘but it must be articulated to become memory’” (6) and herein lies the dynamic ability of memory, not to be lamented *or* ignored, but to “be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (Huyssen 1995:3). It is this inescapable creative interpretation of the past which constitutes memory, and is, moreover, a social process “located in a wide range of cultural routines, institutions and artefacts” (Schudson quoted in Misztal 2003:6).

But if memory is so dynamic in nature, one can indeed ask critical questions about the reliability of memory. Temporality, that passing of time that human being as historical beings are confronted with, is always at the root of the “fragility of identity” (Gardner 2010:110-111) that we so often experience in ourselves and in the communities of which we are a part. The creative potential of memory also means that it is malleable and, consequently, vulnerable.

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6 Cubitt (2007:27-30) rightly observes that our understanding of the relation between history and memory, and more specifically, our understanding of the ways in which memory can inform history, depends on “the discourse on the relationships of past to present in human societies” (27). There are two radically different ways of describing the structure of this relationship. In the first, “the relationship is understood to be cumulative and causal: the past is everything that precedes the present, and that is deemed ... to have contributed to making the present what it is – making it this present rather than another” (27). The second approach puts the emphasis on the present. Here it is not the past that produces the present, but “the present that produces the past, through an effort of creative and analytical imagination” (27). The challenge for “any effort to appreciate the temporal dimension of human existence” is indeed, as Cubitt says, “to bridge the gap between these two understandings” (28).

### 3. REMEMBERING IN SOCIETY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND “LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE”

Conceptualising and describing the link between memory as an individual faculty and memory as a collective activity has been a difficulty in memory studies for a long time.<sup>7</sup> Although this paper cannot deal with the details of this academic conversation, it is necessary to explain what take on collective memory will be used here for the sake of the credibility of the historical analysis it presents. I will do so by mainly drawing on Geoffrey Cubitt’s explanation of collective memory in his book *History and Memory* (2007).

Firstly, collective memory does not imply that social groups or societies are seen as holding the same capacity for memory that individuals do, or that they can be regarded as mnemonic agents. Rather, it implies that although “remembering is fundamentally an activity engaged in by individual minds, it equally fundamentally possesses a social dimension” (Cubitt 2007:118). What is implied by this “social dimension”, for Cubitt, is that remembering individuals are rarely isolated agents, but rather social agents who remember at the same time as they participate in

interactions with other such beings, enmeshed in networks of social relationship, implicated in various kinds of social or cultural community”(Cubitt 2007: 118).<sup>8</sup>

This is also the principal way, Cubitt argues, that memory actually works to weave that sense of continuous selfhood that was referred to above.

For Cubitt, the formation of identity is dependent on ways of connecting our impressions and experiences to things that is “sufficiently durable to animate a sense of identity and to confer a sense of direction” (Cubitt 2007: 125). This ability is reliant on our access to linguistic and cultural structures *that we share with others* (Cubitt 2007: 125). Our access to these cultural resources is facilitated through our membership to certain groups or communities.<sup>9</sup> Olick, however, argues for a link between individual and collective memory that seems more determinate. For him

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7 Cf. Ricoeur, 2004:93-132; Misztal, 2003. Theories of Social Remembering; Gedi, N. & Elam, Y. 1996. Collective memory - what is it? *History and Memory* 8(1): 30-50.

8 This is also in line with the thought of Maurice Halbwachs who argued that we never remember alone. Halbwachs is regarded as one of the founding figures of the concept of collective memory. Cf. Halbwachs, 1980.

9 It is important to note that Halbwachs maintained “that collective memory was not a singular social manifestation but a plural one: there were as many ‘communities of memories’ as there were social groups” (Wood 1994:126)

there are long-term structures to what society remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them (Olick 2010:156).

Olick's observation may be more understandable in the light of Cubitt's view that our personal memory is not only in need of public modes of expression, but that indeed the very fact of our remembering is socially motivated. For Cubitt, it is because we find ourselves in specific social environments, attend certain social occasions, and are spurred to partake in certain social exchanges, that we remember the things we do in the ways we do. He continues:

We remember in the context of conversation, in response to interrogation, under the impulse of some need to contribute to joint activities, or to forge mutual understandings, or to justify ourselves in the eyes of others: the nature of these social occasions shapes the ways in which we remember. Memory, in short, is "embedded" (culturally and socially) as well as "embodied" (physically and individually) (Cubitt 2007:118-119).

In Cubitt's opinion, the moment we begin to regard recollection not as an activity of the isolated, individual mind, but as one "often socially structured and possibly collaborative" (2007:130) we become aware of the fact that what we regard as the real past, true memories of the individual mind, may in fact "be influenced by a wide variety of social consideration" (130).

The question now is how this understanding of memory, and collective memory in particular, assist us in analysing the Heidelberg Catechism in the memory of the Dutch Reformed Church. For this we will refine the concept of collective memory even more and use the notion *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory),<sup>10</sup> coined by Pierre Nora, for our analysis in particular. Jay Winter, drawing on Jan Assmann, provides us with a concise yet nuanced definition of *lieux de mémoire*. For Winter, sites of memory are

places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express 'a collective shared knowledge ... of the past, on which a group's sense of unity and individuality is based'. The group that goes to such sites inherits earlier meanings attached to the event, as well as adding new meanings ... Such sites of memory are topoi with a life history (Winter 2010:312).

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10 For Nora, "sites" not only refer to physical places but also concepts, expressions, symbols, persons, and days of commemoration.

“Sites of memory” are by definition connected to the idea that memory is not an individual phenomena, but a collective one. Analysing the Heidelberg Catechism as site of memory brings us closer to understanding what it signifies for a specific community – what the “collective shared knowledge” that is expressed and inherited through it, is.

#### 4. MEMORIES OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Against the background of the theoretical remarks above, various examples of remembering the Heidelberg Catechism will be organised into four different groups in this section, followed by some concluding remarks.

The importance and weightiness with which the questioning of the Heidelberg Catechism in the synod of 1862 was perceived has already been hinted at in the introduction. The first group of memories will provide more examples of this.

Thirty five years after the synod of 1862 it seems, from the opening words of a small book written in 1898 by A. Dreijer with the title *De Strijd onzer Vaderen tegen het Liberalisme*, that the immensity of the event is still viewed in the same light:

The synod of 1862, which like the famous synod of Dort took place over two years, is probably the most important synod in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (Dreijer 1898:5).<sup>11</sup>

For Dreijer it is clear how this synod is related to other, one might say, world events. Moreover, here we see how 1862, the Heidelberg Catechism and the long hidden but real threat of “liberalism” becomes tightly entwined with each other:

Gedurende de Synode van 1862, werden de lang verborgen kiemen van Ongeloof en Liberalisme, sedert vele jaren reeds ontwikkeld en opgeschoten, in eens openbaar (Dreijer 1898:21-22).

Also elsewhere, Dreyer remembers the questioning of the Heidelberg Catechism by J.J. Kotzé as the moment at which the long feared “liberalism” entered the DRC:

De Synode van 1862 is in de geschiedenis der Ned. Ger. Kerk in Zuid-Afrika zeer belangrijk. Immers in die Synode ontbrandde de grote strijd tegen het liberalisme, die de Kerk acht Jaren bezig gehouden heft. Een geest van leervrijheid begon te verschijnen, die geweigerd heft zich te laten binden door de belijdenisschriften der Kerk, en die

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11 My translation.

het ene dwaarpunt na het andere heeft ingevoerd met de bepaalde strekking om het gehele Evangelie te ondermijnen (Dreyer 1924:114).

For Dreijer, Reverend Kotzé's remark about the Heidelberg Catechism at this synod was a brutal one, and in his book he portrays it as an act of violence:

Deze woorden waren als een vuurbrand geworpen in het vlas; het was een *casus belli*, eene oorlogsverklaring. Daarbij kon het niet gelated worden. Ds. Kotzé had de leer der Kerk aangerand (Dreijer 1898:22-24).

In another example from 1911, 39 years after the synod, J.D. Kestell has similarly dramatic recollections of this event of 1862. In his biography of Prof N.J. Hofmeyr, in a chapter titled "Strijd tegen het Liberalisme 1862-1870", he refers to this event relating to the Heidelberg Catechism as "a raging storm" that broke out at this specific moment. In his portrayal one gets the sense that the church was confronted by a crisis that it had no other choice but to defend itself against:

Terwyl dit een en ander voorgevallen was, had er in dezelfde Synode een storm gewoed. Bij't behandelen van't rapport eener Commissie, om te adviseeren over het prediken over den Heidelbergischen Catechismus, was hij losgebarsten (Kestell 1911:97).

Furthermore, a few pages later Kestell creates the idea that it was inevitable that this was about to happen, and that this was clear even before the synod took place:

Menigeen had met een zwaarmoedig hart de Synode van 1862 tegemoet zien. Het was alsof de Kerk gevoelde, dat zij aan den vooravond stond van gebeurtenissen, die zij niet zonder lijden en verlies zou kunnen doorworstelen (Kestell 1911:99-100).

In 1937, 75 years after the synod of 1862, A. Moorrees, in his magisterial history of the Dutch Reformed Church between 1652 and 1873, shares Kestell's recollection and remembers the event as a "memorable synodical meeting." As the time for the synod drew closer, he writes, they (without qualifying who "they" are) all felt that a crisis was at hand, and the general expectation of the synod was that the advocates of doctrinal freedom ("*leervryheid*") would be determined to show their muscles ("*om kragte te meet*") to those who were firm about upholding the confession of the fathers (Moorrees 1937:898). He views Kotzé's remark as a definite and fierce attack on one of the confessions ("*besliste en ruwer aanval op een van die Belydenisskrifte*") (919).

From these examples it seems that the questioning of the Heidelberg Catechism and, one can add, how such a deed was and ought to be perceived, are remembered in relatively homogeneous terms. There is, moreover, a clear sense that a general and shared understanding of the theological climate of the time contributed to the ways in which Kotzé's remark was received. However, despite the weight attached to it by the opinions cited above, it can hardly be said that the ferocity accorded to the comment can be found in the comment of Kotzé itself. The same can be said about the sentiment found in the examples above that Kotzé's remarks made the Heidelberg Catechism (or indeed the reformed tradition, or even the gospel itself) vulnerable and in need of protection. Can these threats (of war, violence, storms, disbelief) said to have been *real*? Indeed, it seemed that for 75 years they were believed to be genuine.

In the second group of examples we encounter quite a different recollection. These examples come from those who sympathised with J.J. Kotzé. Their opinions were mainly heard in a theological journal called *De Onderzoeker* published between 1860 and 1884. A. Moorrees refers to it in 1837 as the journal belonging to *them*: that own apparatus ("eie orgaan") of the *liberals*.<sup>12</sup>

After the 1862 synod and the disciplinary actions against Kotzé that commenced, M. Versveld, writing on behalf of the church council of the congregation of Darling, gives his opinion of the synodical procedures in a letter to W. Robertson, then scribe of the General Synod, published in *De Onderzoeker*. As opposed to the image of Kotzé and his sympathisers we have from the previous examples, here they do not seem to see themselves as enemies of the Reformed faith:

Eventually it was pointed out by the moderator that it is always very risky to allow things that may lead to damage or destruction of the unity of the Christian church. If only the synod itself took this seriously! Then they wouldn't have asked of the ministers of our church, not only to believe the central truths of our confessional documents, but also especially to defend the very specific wording of those truths. Such letter service is in conflict with the very essence of Protestantism, to such an extent that our minister would have been unfaithful to his task and calling had he not pointed out the utter unreasonableness of such demand (Versveld 1864: 15).<sup>13</sup>

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12 Even so, many articles of those assumed to be fighting on the side of the orthodox (eg. A. Murray and N.J. Hofmeyr) were published in *De Onderzoeker*.

13 My translation. The original reads as follow: "Wij worden eindelijk door U Hoog-Eerw er op gewezen 'dat het ten allen tijde uiterst bedenkelijk is maatregelen te nemen die leiden kunnen tot de verbreking der eenheid eener Christelijke kerk.' Had de Synode zelve dit maar ernstig bedacht! Zij zou dan niet aan de leeraars

This sentiment still echoes in 1870, in an article titled “Leerstukken of Beginnselen?” (“Dogmas or principles?”). The argument is made that the way in which the church authority has been using the Catechism is a denial of the teachings of the fathers of the tradition. It is *the others* who hold the threat to the tradition, so much so that *they* can even be compared to the Roman Catholic Church. “What would the fathers think of us if they were to see us now”, the writer asks. Then he continues:

Three centuries have passed since Guido de Bres, Ursinus and Olevianus ... They would only shake their heads if they were to see us now: how we still today in the Protestant Church do not tolerate any deviation from words which itself is, without doubt, not only an inadequate expression of faith but also an imperfect understanding of the religion that Jesus gave us! Our fathers surely would have powerfully protested against the decisions of our Synod if they were to see how the Synod, like the Roman Catholic Church, claims the infallibility of its own teaching. There is no difference between Rome and our synod ... As soon as the teaching or the words of the Reformers are seen as infallible, as something that is binding and valid for all times, then one becomes unfaithful to the very *principles* of the Reformation. Deviating from the principles of the Reformation is a much bigger heresy than deviating from any specific teaching (De Onderzoeker nr 132, p.155).<sup>14</sup>

A few lines further the author argues for the importance to differentiate between the *spirit* of the Reformers and their *teachings*. It is as if we find an example here of an argument about what it *really* means to be reformed.<sup>15</sup> He emphasises that those who *really* love the Reformation

daarom behooren deze zich op het krachtigst te verzetten tegen het streven eener partij, die op den naar Rome leidenden weg wandelts en die hare ontrouw aan den geest der vadersen tracht te bedekken door een groot geroep te maken over hare trouw aan hunne leer (p.155).

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onzer kerk den eisch gesteld hebben om niet slechts de hoofdwaarheden van een onzer belijdenisschriften, maar ook elke bijzondere bewoording, waarin die waarheden uitgedrukt zijn, te *verdedigen*. Zul eene letterdienst is zoo zeer in strijd met de grondbeginselen van het protestantisme, dat onze leeraar ontrouw zou geweest zijn aan zijnen pligt, zoo hij niet op het krachtigst de onredelijkheid van den gestelden eisch had aangetoond.”

14 My translation.

15 One can almost say that it is the Heidelberg Catechism against the Heidelberg Catechism. See Vosloo (2009) here for a discussion of the way in which this “tradition against tradition” logic became a characteristic of reformed theology in South Africa.

In an article in November 1871, it seems that the emotions about the events around the Heidelberg Catechism is still very high. Again, the other group is made out as the enemies of tradition, even as supporters of the Roman Catholic idea of “infallibility” – a monstrous doctrine:

[the events of 1862] ... leaves one with the impression that these are orthodox men of infallibility. How else can one explain such merciless judgment of a brother? ... We want to repeat this: this dogma is a monster that we will fight with all our might (De Onderzoeker nr 143, pp. 86).<sup>16</sup>

In the December edition of 1873, a speech of J.J. Kotze is published in which he states:

Since 1862 the men of our Synod have not given a single step away from their superstitious veneration of the authority of the Formulae ... For them the Catechism is from beginning to end an inspired book that does not tolerate or permit any questions or contradictions. If ever an unbearable yoke has been put on the shoulders of the ministers, it is this anti-Protestant requirement that they should lay themselves down at the work of Ursinus, as if he had received a revelation directly from heaven (De Onderzoeker nr. 167, pp. 142).<sup>17</sup>

The third group of examples illustrates how the eventual outcomes of the struggle is interpreted. The outcome of the struggle about the Heidelberg Catechism becomes a sign for the battle between good and evil, and, of course, both sides see themselves winning and on the side of justice.

According to Moorrees, *De Onderzoeker* triumphantly claimed the victory of the “liberals” when the synod was forced to allow T.F. Burgers and J.J. Kotzé back in the meeting:

Until this point God has been fighting on our side, and he crowned us as the victors. Therefore, remain steadfast and persevere, even in the face of differences of opinion, and human strife. Where seriousness and a commitment to truth inspires us, there we also wear the armour of God and become invincible (Moorrees, 1937: 998).<sup>18</sup>

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16 My translation. In the same article the so-called orthodox authority of the church are compared to the pope: “De Paus heeft met al zijne ideen van onfeilbaarheid nooit aanspraak gemaakt op meerdere onderwerping aan de dicta van zijne kerk dan de confessionaristen doen ... Tusschen de Gereformeerde en Roomsche onfeilbaarheidsleer is op den keper beschouwd geen onderscheid hoegenaamd” (86).

17 My translation.

18 My translation.

But he gives his own interpretation of these victory cries:

Maar de oorwinnings waarop hulle geroem het, was meer denkbeeldig as werklik. As kerklike rigting het die Liberalisme by ons, ewemin as in Nederland, lewensvatbaarheid getoon (Moorrees 1937: 999).

According to Moorrees, there were measures taken to make sure that the church became inaccessible for unorthodox ministers like J.J. Kotzé. With the retirement of Kotze in 1894, Moorrees claims, “the last liberal element finally disappeared from the scene” (1002). According to him, this shows once again that any attempt of humans to uphold the truth of God is doomed to fail; whereas there where God himself fights for his truth, He is always invincible (Moorrees 1937:1003).

Dreijer has similar recollections about the struggle and its victors when he writes about it in 1898:

We say it nearly led to division among brothers in the church, but luckily it was prevented. The liberal ministers soon came to the insight that they are not welcome in our church, that they don't belong here and that they have no ground beneath their feet. Their relationship with the church was a false one ... With this the last notes of the *moderns* faded. They cried “victory” much too early; they started their work of destruction way too ambitiously, and kept track with the power of truth, as the church confesses and upholds it, too little ... After the synod of 1870 they had no position in the church. They talked, and men allowed them to talk; but nobody took any more notice of them (1898:46-47).

And somewhat later:

Liberalism in the DRC belongs to the past. The battles of 1862-1870 did her good, and helped her to come to terms with her strengths as well as her weaknesses. From the hand of providence of our Lord much good has come from the bad. Our eyes have been opened, and the church has learned to find its refuge in the Lord (p.52).

The fourth group of examples demonstrates recollections from the time in which the so-called “Du Plessis-saak” (the case of Du Plessis) played itself out.<sup>19</sup> In Februarie 1928, *Die Ou Paaie*, a conservative theological

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19 Johannes du Plessis was a professor of theology at Stellenbosch Theological Seminary. He founded a journal *Het Zoeklicht* that was perceived as “liberal and progressive.” After a long battle (theological and legal) regarding orthodoxy (“regsinnigheid”) and specifically the Three Formulae of Unity, Prof Du Plessis was discharged from his position at the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary. For detailed accounts of this, see Olivier, A.R. 1990. *Die Kerk en die Du*

journal, published an article titled “Die dwaling wat ons kerk in die laaste eeu bedreig het.” The article sings the praises of Prof N.J. Hofmeyr for the way in which his prophetic insight aided the “struggle against liberalism” in the 1860s.

Die laaste eeu het die opkoms van ’n gevaarlike dwaling in ons Kerk gesien ... Sy [Hofmeyr’s] woorde getuig nie alleen van ’n skerpsinnige profetiese insig in die ontsettende gevaar wat die Kerk bedreig het nie, maar van ’n heilige vuur en ywer vir die handhawing van die eer van Kristus, die volle gesag van Godswoord, die kerklike tug (Die Ou Paaie, nr 5, pp. 123-124)

A few pages later there is an article that discusses *De Onderzoeker* and compares it to a new theological journal, disliked in the circles of Die Ou Paaie:

As in the days of *De Onderzoeker* we are now confronted with *Het Zoeklicht*, albeit in a slightly alternated form. It still comes with the same dangers (p.130).

This is again followed by an article titled “Die dwaling wat ons kerk in hierdie eeu bedreig.” Towards the end of the article the author confronts the reader with a seemingly straightforward question. For him it comes down to this: “does the position taken by *Het Zoeklicht* constitute a deviation and danger or not?” (p.131). He affirms that to *them* the viewpoints of Du Plessis’s journal are exceptionally dangerous and in principle calls for a struggle against the very same things that Prof N.J. Hofmeyr so faithfully and diligently struggled against in the previous century. The church has come to a crossroad again, he states, and once more decisions need to be made. “Are we going to collude with the evil that already earlier threatened to destroy our church?” (p.131). A few pages later the article ends with rhetorical questions charged with emotion:

Is dit nie hoog, hoog tyd dat hieraan ’n einde gemaak word nie. Gaan ons langer met vuur speel? Gaan ons lig dink oor die krag en invloed van ons kerk in die verlede deur Gods genade uitgeoefen het? Gaan ons haar blootstel aan ’n toenemende beroering wat tot in lengte van dae ’n sure nasmaak sal en moet hê? “Wee diegene deur wie die ergernisse kom!” (p.136).

The case of Kotzé and that of Du Plessis are, of course, two separate historical incidents. Nevertheless, the ways in which they were conjoined in DRC memory, as illustrated above, made its mark on the

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Plessis-saak met besondere verwysing na die ekklesiologiese situasie; Vosloo, R.R. 2010. Konfessionele neo-Calvinisme na die Du Plessis-saak.

self-understanding of this community and the ways in which it has come to understand the role of confessing documents in maintaining its identity. Theological discourses during both periods became soaked in accusations of *vrysinnigheid/onregsinnigheid* and *bekrompenheid/regsinnigheid*, with the Formulae of Unity made the judge. This often led to either the view that the confessional documents are confining and in need of revision or rejection, or the conviction that they have been neglected and should therefore be studied and proclaimed with vigour. What is more, both these stances were being grounded in loyalty to Reformed principles, and were believed to be a competent antidote to the opposing and unwanted theological position.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A careful analysis of the (historical) development of the shapes and meanings that the Heidelberg Catechism (and the Formulae of Unity as a whole) has taken on in the collective memory of the DRC asks for a lot more research than is presented here. However, what can be inferred from these examples is that confessions in general, and the Heidelberg Catechism in particular, make out a rather big part of the DRC's collective memory, and the memories of which it consist are not confined to the 1560s and the Synod of Dort of 1618-1619. As a site of memory, the Heidelberg Catechism is inevitably also a site of second-order memory – a place “where people remember the memories of others” (Winter 2010:313).

Despite the uncontested Reformed character of the Heidelberg Catechism, it carries with it more than one contestation of what it means to be Reformed. The period 1862-1937 was one during which this controversy moved beyond what the Heidelberger itself could address because of the ways in which opposing groups claimed Reformed identity. The same can be said about the supposed role of the Catechism, through its place in the Formulae of Unity, in safeguarding the unity of and harmony in the church. Instead of being a unifying document, it became an instrument of enmity and dissidence.

If remembering is seen as an attempt to “incorporate a living past into the present” (Provan 2003:240), analysing the memory of the Heidelberger is a shot at understanding how that incorporation takes place. For the DRC the Heidelberg Catechism carries with it meanings, potentialities, contestations and exclusions from the past into the present that are both realistic and idealistic. It really is a document with (for some) a praiseworthy theological structure that has been widely preached and taught in the church, but it is only ideally a source of theological origin or direction, and constitutive of the true church.

As the historian, George Harinck, once said during a lecture on the Barmen Declaration at Fuller Seminary, “the church as such, or the pure church, does exist in theology, but you will never meet the pure church in history.” There is much to be gained from this fruitful distinction in trying to come to grips with who we are as a church in any particular time. For Reformed churches, it is that very distance between what we believe and who we are that creates the space to confess and embody our faith afresh. A better understanding of our pasts is one of the things that helps us to do so.

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